

Laurie Baker, the Gandhi of Indian architecture who believed in local, sustainable building

Laurie Baker, the renowned British-born architect, received multiple awards and honours, but the one he cared about most was his Indian citizenship.

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Screengrab from *Uncommon Sense: The Life and Architecture of Laurie Baker* by Vineet Radhakrishnan

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In a biography of the renowned British-born Indian architect, titled *Laurie Baker: Life, Work and Writings*, in 1991, Gautam Bhatia wrote, “We still do not see that the most important industry in the country is the building industry. We refuse to see that it can absorb every type of worker from the highly skilled scanties to the completely non-skilled labourer. It can solve a large area of our unemployment problem and furthermore, it can start immediately, if we will it, as no other industry can.”

Laurie Baker was an architect whose approach to his craft was driven by his emphasis on low costs and employment generation through

discovering local skills and materials. Baker's works and beliefs, which question the divide between the building industry and the daily wage construction worker, seem even more relevant today, when India is witnessing migrant workers with little support head back from cities to their villages after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of a nationwide lockdown.

On 2 March 1917, Laurence Wilfred Baker was born in a devoted Christian Methodist family in Birmingham, England. His father, Wilfred Baker was the chief accountant at the Birmingham Gas Distribution Authority and was keen his son pursue a career in the sciences.

However, in 1932, at the Edward Grammar School in Aston, England, Laurie Baker's headmaster told him and his father Wilfred Baker, "Science and Commerce can be ruled out. Maths you'll not be able to manage. Don't even hope that with profit and loss calculations he'll inherit your seat. The Arts seem to be the most appropriate for him."

The Senior Baker quipped, "He's always on to something with paper and scissors."

The headmaster told them, "So tomorrow bring along some of your cardboard houses and show them to me...Don't worry Mr Wilfred, send Laurie tomorrow and we'll get him an admission for Architecture."

And fortunately for India, architecture turned out to be Baker's calling. During his student days at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, from where he graduated in 1937, Europe was witness to political turmoil. He spent a lot of time backpacking through Europe and his experiences found themselves infused in his work later on.

Baker's travels also led him to India, after which he never found it in himself to leave the country. In 1945, he had encountered Mahatma Gandhi by chance and was awestruck, Gandhi's teachings are reflected in Baker's works later.

For the next three years, Baker travelled across India on the leprosy mission during which he helped repair leprosy homes. He also spent a few years at Pithoragarh (now in Uttarakhand) and finally moved to Thiruvananthapuram in 1970, where he spent the rest of his life.

Some of his most [notable](#) works can be spotted in Thiruvananthapuram, such as the Centre for Development Studies and The Indian Coffee House. The [Literacy House in Lucknow](#) designed by Baker has also grabbed attention for commemorating Gandhi's dream of "serving India through its villages".

Vineet Radhakrishnan, Baker's grandson, [once recalled](#), "My grandfather was least interested in publicising his work or himself. He was a mainstream architect who was even ignored in the earlier years; his work was criticised and opposed, which later turned into grudging admiration." Baker consistently questioned the status quo. "Is it necessary?" was his constant question to everything.

On his 13th death anniversary, here is a glimpse into Laurie Baker's architectural ethic and the legacy he leaves behind.

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Less is more

In his Marathi book *Laurie Baker*, later translated into English, Atul Deulgaonkar [quotes Baker as saying](#), “Cost-effective houses are not just for the poor, they are for everyone. The equation that a cost-effective house is a house for the poor, implying a bad looking house, can definitely be proved wrong. Isn’t it the responsibility of the upper and middle classes to stop indulging in extravagance and make better looking houses instead? This entire classification is wrong.”

Apart from being a strong advocate of low-cost building, Baker also made sure that his building materials were eco-friendly and affordable.

In 1972, the then chief minister of Kerala decided to use Baker’s ideas to streamline housing programmes for the state. His designs were incorporated in a manual published in 1986 by the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development. This manual was translated into Malayalam and was distributed among local building offices in Kerala.

Baker strongly believed that “less is more” and reminded everyone of the merits of an “honest structure”. In Gautam Bhatia’s biography, he is quoted as saying, “We have already forgotten that many of our big old irrigation and power dams, which still serve us efficiently, were built with lime mortar and knew nothing about cement... It is only necessary for us to go one step further with the research work which our forefathers have done — that is for us to add on our twentieth century contribution to improve on what has already been achieved. But it must be a contribution and not a contradiction or a confrontation.”

‘Gandhi of Indian architecture’

Baker’s fascination with low-cost, local and sustainable building designs and his minimalist aesthetic earned him the title of ‘[Gandhi of architecture](#)’. Like Gandhi, Baker was ahead of his time, given that he advocated local, eco-friendly materials and methods (such as rainwater harvesting) back in the 1950s, long before it was trendy.

Gandhi had a huge influence on Baker, who [said](#), “I believe that Gandhiji is the only leader in our country who has talked consistently with common-sense about the building needs of our country. What he said many years ago is even more pertinent now. One of the things he said that impressed me and has influenced my thinking more than anything else was that the ideal houses in the ideal village will be built using materials which are all found within a five-mile radius of the house.”

At first, Baker confessed, he thought Gandhi’s ideal was “far-fetched”. However, 40 years into architecture, Baker said, “If only I had not been so proud and sure of my learning and my training as an architect, I could have seen clearly wonderful examples of Gandhiji’s wisdom all around me throughout the entire period I lived in the Himalayas and later in Kerala’s tribal hill ranges.”

Baker received a number of awards and honours, including the Order of the British Empire, MBE in 1983, the Padma Shri in 1990 and a Pritzker Prize nomination in 2006. But despite so many accolades, he considered his [Indian citizenship](#), which he received in 1988, as his real award.